

Foundation vice president says John Paul I is not a closed chapter in Church history

Stefania Falasca is a foremost expert of Pope John Paul I – the “Smiling Pope,” born Albino Luciani – whose pontificate lasted a mere 33 days, from Aug. 26 to Sept. 28, 1978. Falasca, who covers the Vatican for the Italian Catholic newspaper *Avvenire* and is vice postulator for the late pope’s canonization cause, was chosen by Pope Francis as vice president of the [recently established John Paul I Vatican Foundation](#). Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin serves as its president.

The purpose of the foundation is to deepen the person, thoughts and teachings of John Paul I, a pope “who has been and remains a point of reference for the history of the Church,” as Falasca told *Our Sunday Visitor*.

Our Sunday Visitor: How did you welcome your appointment as vice president of this new Vatican foundation?



Stefania Falasca: I am happy with the birth of the foundation! Finally, even for Pope John Paul I, an ad hoc body has been set up to study him and his work. Since contributions from a historical point of view are still scarce, I see this as an important and necessary step in memory of him, and more importantly, in order to rediscover Pope Luciani, John Paul I, with the seriousness that he deserves.

Our Sunday Visitor: Your doctorate was on Luciani’s writings, and you are currently vice postulator of his cause for canonization. Do you think that the foundation’s activity can

continue the work done by the cause?

Falasca: The cause of canonization of John Paul I ended with the proclamation of his heroic virtues on Nov. 9, 2017. Now, the trial of an alleged miracle is in its final judgment phase. The cause therefore follows its own process. But the work of acquiring paperwork, sources and archival excavation required by the cause, which I have been involved in for over a decade, is very important. ... Unlike for other popes, this had never been done for John Paul I. But only documented sources allow one to speak about Luciani in scientific terms, necessary according to objectives of the foundation: to promote research and protect the cultural and spiritual heritage of John Paul I.

Our Sunday Visitor: In your book "[Pope Luciani: Chronicle of a Death](#)," you dismantled the theory of unnatural death, without the possibility of objections.

Falasca: I did not intend to dismantle novels and storytelling, which, unfortunately over time, have ended up engulfing Luciani's biography and pontificate. However, on the basis of all the findings, critically assessed, it can be definitively stated that the cause of the "sudden death" was myocardial infarction.

The term "sudden" in forensic medicine always means "natural death." Luciani was not killed; he was killed after death by credit being given to those who cleverly speculated on captivating people's imaginations with the idea of a pope's violent death. The plots of murder mysteries are profitable, but from a historical point of view, what matters are only sources and documented evidence.

Our Sunday Visitor: His pontificate was very brief.

Falasca: Brief, yes, but it was not the passage of a meteor. Luciani is still a sign of the everlasting hopes rooted in the never-forgotten treasure of the ancient Church – a Church

without worldly triumphs, living on the reflected light of Christ, close to the teaching of the great Fathers; the Church that the Second Vatican Council returned to. The priorities of Pope John Paul I came from here.

Our Sunday Visitor: What do you believe were his priorities?

Falasca: They were all expressed in gestures and words, even in such a short time. Luciani made the Church go forward along the highways, if you will, returning to the Gospel and to a renewed missionary spirit, pursuing service in ecclesial poverty, dialogue with contemporaneity, collegiality in episcopal fraternity, search for unity with the brothers of the other Christian Churches, peace, interreligious dialogue.
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Our Sunday Visitor: Where do you believe Pope Francis' interest in this predecessor comes from?

Falasca: Bergoglio did not meet Luciani in person, but he was an attentive reader of his writings. He gave me some suggestions, too, many years ago, on the theological foundation of the *sermo humilis* ("humble speech") adopted by Pope Luciani in preaching, when I wrote my doctoral thesis on *Illustrissimi* ("To the Illustrious Ones," a collection of imaginary letters written by Cardinal Luciani to famous characters of the past, such as Jesus, Charles Dickens and many others).

Our Sunday Visitor: What do you think are the traits shared by Pope Francis and Pope John Paul I?

Falasca: John Paul I, first of all, was a witness of God's merciful love – that merciful love being the nature of his heart. I find here profound consonances with Francis. The similarities are evident in being both apostles of the Second Vatican Council. Luciani is the first pope elected after the council, Bergoglio the first pope ordained priest after the council. As sons of the council, simply and naturally, they

embody it. The four general audiences held by Luciani on humility, faith, hope and charity are the clearest evidence of how effective his eloquence was, in the light of the Gospel and in the wake of Vatican II. Closeness, humility, simplicity and insistence on God's mercy and tenderness ... this is the "conciliar" magisterium of Pope Luciani that attracted the People of God, 40 years ago, and makes John Paul I current even today, and close to Pope Francis' teachings.

Our Sunday Visitor: It is always said that history is not made with "if." But if it wasn't so short, what sort of pontificate would it have been?

Falasca: Since his first programmatic speech, he emphasized announcing the Gospel as "the first duty of the whole Church." Then, from the Papal Basilica of St. John Lateran, he referred again to the poor as the "true treasures of the Church." This is indeed the true, direct link to the present age.

Our Sunday Visitor: Therefore?

Falasca: There is therefore no need to wonder what the Church would have been with him. The image of the Church he nourished was the Church of the beatitudes, the Church of the poor in spirit, the Church that does not follow the logic of cliques and mystifications. This is a chapter in the history of the popes that has not ended with Luciani.

The internal review of the Church started with [Pope St.] John XXIII, the council and [Pope St.] Paul VI is not a parenthesis. The pontificate of Albino Luciani didn't unfold in history, but he contributed more than anyone else to strengthening and witnessing, up to today, the design of a Church that goes back to its sources, in order to be faithful to its mission in the world.

Deborah Castellano Lubov writes from Rome.